



Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform

Philadelphia's Teacher Hiring and School Assignment Practices: Comparisons with Other Districts EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report compares the way the School District of Philadelphia goes about hiring and placing teachers in schools with the practices of other districts. We did this to inform the current debate over these processes. What we found was that Philadelphia's policies diverge from those of other urban and suburban systems and that it is poorly positioned to take advantage of the region's oversupply of newly trained teachers.

Philadelphia's practices: Philadelphia is one of the few urban districts where principals and school staffs have little say over staffing decisions for their buildings. Only in the 44 schools that have voted for site selection of teachers (about 16% of the schools in the system), do principals and teachers choose which new teachers and transferring teachers will join their faculties. School leaders in Philadelphia cannot easily build like-minded collegial work teams nor can they fill vacancies with new teachers in a timely way because provisions in the district's collective bargaining agreement require a cumbersome voting process for site selection and give qualified veteran teachers automatic first rights to fill vacancies. Further, efforts to attract qualified teachers to the lowest-performing schools are hobbled by the current centralized hiring system and ironclad seniority rules governing teacher transfers included in the current contract.

The study: In order to place Philadelphia's human resource practices in a larger context, we interviewed directors of human resources in 9 districts just outside of Philadelphia in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and we studied hiring and school placement practices in 13 urban districts across the country.¹ These interviews took place between January and March 2004. In the urban districts, we conducted 30 telephone interviews with human resource officials, union leaders, and administrators in partner organizations, read collective bargaining agreements and relevant reports, and looked at recruitment information on district websites.

KEY FINDINGS

In 12 of the 13 urban districts, principals, often assisted by school teams, play the major role in selecting new teachers. Unlike Philadelphia, no vote is required to do this. New York City was the

only district where teachers were routinely assigned to schools by a central or regional office, but even there, 38% of the schools have site selection (55% vote required) and the United Federation of Teachers is in favor of the school-based option. It is likely that system-wide site selection will become the norm in New York City in the coming year.

Site selection of teachers is the norm in all of the nine districts we looked at in nearby districts in the Philadelphia region. These districts often call candidates back to the school and district office for multiple interviews.

Automated applicant tracking systems and Internet hiring sites are expediting the decentralization of the hiring process in many other districts. In 7 of the 13 urban districts, principals can view candidates' applications on an electronic site before deciding which ones to call in for an interview. In Pennsylvania suburbs, candidates routinely post their applications on PA-REAP, an Internet site for job-seeking teachers, that are then reviewed by principals and human resource managers.

In 11 of the 13 urban districts and 8 of the 9 suburban districts, teachers who are voluntarily transferring among schools must first interview at and be chosen by those schools. This is also true in the site selection schools in New York City.

In many districts, even involuntary transfers must first interview and be accepted at the receiving school although they are usually eventually placed in a position somewhere in the system. This was true in half of the urban districts we studied. Rules about involuntary transfers are complex, often depending on the reason for the transfer (e.g. school closures or reconstitutions), and these rules usually give some sort of job protection to teachers by seniority status.

While all of the urban districts have mounted aggressive teacher recruitment efforts, only a few have developed a robust package of incentives to attract and retain certified teachers to the hardest-to-staff schools. Charlotte-Mecklenberg County, New York City, Baltimore, and Hamilton County, Tennessee have used a combination of incentives—site selection, salary bonuses, smaller classes, tuition reimbursement, more classroom materials, and assignment of effective principals—to staff the neediest schools with strong teachers. Philadelphia, like most other districts, has relied on small bonuses and recruitment of novice teachers in alternative certification programs to fill vacancies in these schools.

In sum, Philadelphia's teacher staffing practices stand out as unusually centralized and inflexible compared to those of neighboring districts and other urban systems, leaving it at a disadvantage in attracting qualified teachers.

*- Elizabeth Useem, Senior Research Consultant, Research for Action
- Elizabeth Farley, Doctoral student, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania
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¹ The urban districts were New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami-Dade County, Houston, Austin, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Charlotte-Mecklenberg, Washington, DC, Baltimore, Atlanta, and Pittsburgh. New Jersey districts included Camden, Pennsauken, Cherry Hill, and Haddon Heights. Pennsylvania systems included Upper Darby, Bensalem, Pennsbury, Lower Merion, and William Penn.