

## Teacher Performance Management and Staffing in

# Jonesboro Public Schools

Jonesboro Public Schools (JPS) has made steady efforts to increase instructional quality in recent years, but a rapidly changing student population and a flawed teacher evaluation process require JPS to reform its human capital practices to fully support and advance its vision of high-performing schools.

## Introduction

In the fall of 2008, The New Teacher Project (TNTP) partnered with Jonesboro Public Schools (JPS) of Jonesboro, Arkansas to assess the impact of the district's policies and practices on the ability of schools to hire, develop and keep effective teachers. In addition, JPS was one of 12 school districts nationwide to participate in TNTP's study of teacher evaluation policies, which resulted in the June 2009 report *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness* ([www.widgeteffect.org](http://www.widgeteffect.org)). Data collected in JPS for this study included the following:

- Interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders, including district leadership, school board members, principals and teachers;
- Analysis of district teacher recruitment, hiring, transfer, evaluation, non-renewal and dismissal data; and
- Online surveys of principals and teachers (323 teachers and 8 principals responded to the survey, with response rates of 88 percent and 80 percent, respectively).

TNTP's analysis reveals that the "widget effect" – the tendency of the nation's public school systems to ignore differences in teacher effectiveness – plays out in JPS through an inconsistently implemented teacher evaluation process. Evaluation is not prioritized, nearly all teacher evaluation ratings are the same, and teachers receive little meaningful feedback on their performance and limited differentiated development opportunities. These challenges contribute to teacher perceptions of the evaluation process as perfunctory, despite efforts to develop JPS principals into true instructional leaders.

## Findings

**JPS's teacher evaluation system fails to differentiate instructional effectiveness and does not formally identify or address poor performance.**

Similar to other districts with binary rating systems, nearly all JPS teachers are rated as satisfactory, with less than 1 percent of teachers receiving a "did not meet expectations" rating in the last five years. Evidence of poor instructional performance, however, exists in the district: one-third of JPS teachers and one-quarter of JPS principals believe that there are non-probationary teachers in their school who

Less than 1 percent of all JPS teachers were assigned a "did not meet expectations" rating in the last five years.

should be dismissed for poor instructional performance but have not been. Despite this perception, no teachers have been formally dismissed in the last five years. Principals choose not to formally address poor instructional performance, citing disruptions to school culture and lack of confidence in the process as reasons for not pursuing dismissal when warranted. Instead, principals indicate that they use informal means to address struggling teachers. Yet, in the last three years, only two teachers have either resigned or retired as a result of being notified of poor instructional performance.

**In addition, the current evaluation process does not meaningfully support teachers to develop and improve their instructional practice.**

Only a slight majority of JPS teachers (58 percent) believes that the evaluation process helps them improve their instructional performance. One-third of all teachers do not think that the evaluation process provides them with useful feedback. As a JPS teacher explained, “Evaluations should provide teachers with constructive feedback. There should always be areas to improve or suggestions/questions for the teacher about what is going on [in] classes. Simply visiting a classroom twice a year is not helpful, especially when there is no feedback.” Principals are even less likely to believe the evaluation process is effective; only 38 percent of principals agree that the evaluation process helps their teachers improve their instructional performance.

**Though JPS has taken the necessary initial steps to increase school leadership capacity, principals need more training and support to become effective at teacher performance management.**

In the past two years, JPS has instituted several initiatives to develop, train and hold principals accountable for improving teacher effectiveness, but there still exists a significant 21 point gap between teacher and principal confidence levels in principals’ ability to provide teachers with information and strategies to improve instructional performance. Less than half of principals (45 percent) report having received “extensive” or “very extensive” training on how to conduct an effective evaluation, and nearly all principals echoed the sentiment that adequate time to observe and evaluate teachers is lacking.

**A changing student population is challenging JPS to improve its recruitment practices and begin using personnel data in a focused, strategic manner to inform its human capital decisions.**

Recruiting and hiring shortage-area and diverse teacher candidates has been a challenge for JPS. While the majority of principals are satisfied with the quantity of teacher applicants to JPS, only one-quarter agree that the new hire pool includes enough high-need candidates. Additionally, in a district whose students of color and English language learner population have increased by 25 percent over the last four years, only six percent of new hires in the same time period were teachers of color. Finally, math, science and special education teachers are more likely than their colleagues to plan on leaving JPS within three years, but JPS currently does not have the necessary data to ensure the district’s most effective teachers are retained.

## Recommendations

Jonesboro Public Schools must develop its human capital practices in two critical areas in order to continue building a highly effective teacher workforce:

1. Develop and implement a credible, comprehensive teacher performance management system.
2. Strategically manage the talent pipeline through improved use of data and targeted support.

Specific recommendations include:

- The adoption and faithful implementation of a fair, accurate and comprehensive teacher evaluation system with rigorous and transparent performance standards. This system should provide frequent, actionable feedback to teachers and facilitate the exiting of poor performers from the district;
- Continued training and support for principals in teacher performance management;
- Implementation of a data management system that allows JPS to collect key applicant, employment and performance data;
- Use of existing data to inform recruitment, staffing and development decisions; and
- Setting spring deadlines that encourage teachers to notify the district of their intent to resign or retire.

To view the report in its entirety, including more detailed data and a full description of the recommendations, please visit <http://widgeteffect.org/district-reports/jonesboro>.

## About The New Teacher Project

The New Teacher Project (TNTP) helps school districts and states fulfill the promise of public education by ensuring that all students—especially those from high-need communities—get excellent teachers. A national nonprofit organization founded by teachers, TNTP is driven by the knowledge that although great teachers are the best solution to educational inequality, the nation’s education systems do not sufficiently prioritize the goal of effective teachers for all. In response, TNTP develops customized programs and policy interventions that enable education leaders to find, develop and keep great teachers and achieve reforms that promote effective teaching in every classroom. Since its inception in 1997, TNTP has recruited or trained approximately 33,000 teachers—mainly through its highly selective Teaching Fellows™ programs—benefiting an estimated 4.8 million students. TNTP has also released a series of acclaimed studies of the policies and practices that affect the quality of the nation’s teacher workforce, most recently including *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness* (2009). Today TNTP is active in more than 25 cities, including Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, New Orleans, New York, and Oakland, among others. For more information, please visit [www.tntp.org](http://www.tntp.org).