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The Impact of State and Local Human Capital Policies on **Rockford Public Schools**

In the fall of 2008, The New Teacher Project (TNTP) partnered with Rockford Public Schools (RPS) and the Rockford Education Association (REA) in Illinois to analyze the impact of state and local policies and practices on the teacher workforce and to make recommendations to increase the concentration of highly effective teachers in RPS.

The research was part of a national, multi-year study of teacher evaluation and dismissal. TNTP published its national findings in its June 2009 report, *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness* (www.widgeteffect.org).

TNTP's analysis of Rockford included the following components:

- Review of Illinois state laws, Illinois State Board of Education regulations, RPS procedures, the agreement between RPS and the REA and other relevant policy documents;
- Stakeholder interviews with district administrators, Human Resources staff members, REA officials, principals and teachers;
- Online surveys of district teachers and administrators (947 teachers and 92 administrators surveyed with response rates of 55 percent and 86 percent respectively); and
- Analysis of teacher performance management data from the 2003-04 through 2008-09 school years.

TNTP's analysis reveals shortcomings in both the state and district approaches to managing the effectiveness of the RPS teacher workforce. Specifically, RPS struggles to support teachers as they navigate a confusing state certification process, to satisfy new teachers who participate in the district's mentor program, and to avoid unnecessary disruption of the teacher workforce during layoffs. Moreover, RPS fails to evaluate its teachers rigorously and provide them with the necessary feedback to improve their instruction.

Findings

1. Teacher evaluations are based upon brief and infrequent classroom observations, and result in almost all tenured teachers being ranked as "excellent." Eighty-two percent of RPS teachers report being observed three times or less for their most recent evaluation. When observed, 76 percent of RPS teachers indicate that the observations lasted 30 minutes or less, compared with 59 and 15 percent of teachers in two other Illinois districts studied. The resulting evaluations are inflated: 80 percent of

tenured RPS teachers received “excellent” ratings between 2003-04 and 2007-08. However, probationary teachers in RPS receive the top rating less frequently; only 37 percent of RPS probationary teachers received “excellent” ratings over the same period.

2. Inflated evaluations fail to provide teachers with crucial feedback to improve instruction, and prevent schools from addressing poor performance. Only 21 percent of RPS teachers surveyed had areas of their performance identified as “unsatisfactory” or “in need of improvement” on their last evaluation. Additionally, 43 percent of teachers report that there are tenured teachers in their schools who should be dismissed for performance concerns but have not been. Since the 2005-06 school year, only 2 teachers have been dismissed for poor performance.

3. RPS’ reduction in force policy leads to unnecessary disruption, as most teachers are recalled soon after being laid off. Since the 2002-03 school year, RPS has laid off approximately 450 teachers. Among those who have been recalled, 46 percent were recalled within one month of receiving a layoff notice and 48 percent returned to the same school. Yet, while many teachers return, 79 percent of principals report losing teachers they wanted to keep due to a reduction in force. Such unnecessary disruption has a devastating effect on school administrators’ attempts to build strong instructional teams.

4. RPS provides minimal guidance to teachers renewing their teaching certificate, and has trouble filling high-need vacancies because of cumbersome certification rules. Nearly half of RPS’ newest teachers, 48 percent, do not believe they receive adequate support from the district when seeking their standard teaching certificate. Additionally, only 26 percent of these teachers find the process for gaining their standard certificate “easy to navigate,” indicating a significant need for guidance from the district. Forty-six percent of RPS administrators report having trouble filling vacancies because of strict certification requirements and nearly a third, 32 percent, have lost desirable candidates because they could not fulfill the state’s requirements.

5. New teachers report low rates of satisfaction with RPS’ mentor program. RPS successfully enrolls almost three-quarters (73%) of new teachers with no prior experience in the district’s mentor program. Yet only 42 percent of all participants report being “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the program. In comparison, mentor program participants in other surveyed Illinois districts report satisfaction rates of 70 and 52 percent. Lack of enthusiasm among RPS teachers may stem, in part, from infrequent opportunities to observe their mentor teaching. Teachers who did have opportunities to observe and be observed by their mentor report higher rates of satisfaction with the program.

Recommendations

To ensure that teachers in Rockford Public Schools receive the support and feedback they need to be successful in the classroom, RPS and the REA must work together to adopt the following reforms:

1. Implement a fair, credible and rigorous teacher evaluation process that differentiates teachers based upon performance, and provides them with continuous feedback and support in order to promote student learning;
2. Hold RPS administrators accountable for implementing the evaluation process accurately;
3. Limit the number of unnecessary layoffs by using improved forecasting methods.

4. Improve the quality of support provided to teachers, especially those newest to teaching, as they renew their teaching certificates;
5. Develop strategies to increase the number of candidates in high-need subject areas;
6. Increase new teachers' access to mentoring activities that they find most beneficial to their instruction and evaluate the mentor program by tracking its impact on improved teacher performance;

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

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 recognizes that although teachers matter more than any other school factor in student success, the nation's education systems are not aligned with the goal of an effective teacher in every classroom. In response, TNTP develops customized programs and policy interventions that enable education leaders to diagnose their teacher quality challenges and find, develop and keep great teachers. 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.